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Good Diplomats Don't Grow on Political Plum Trees

By CLAIBORNE PELL

To judge by comments made on April 7 by the White House personnel director, E. Pendleton James, the problem with American diplomacy is that there are too many career Foreign Service officers serving as ambassadors abroad. According to this thesis, career diplomats suffer from chronic deficiencies: They don't have direct access to the President or to his top advisers and, as professional diplomats, they are small-minded bureaucrats who represent only themselves and are fit only to tend to the minutiae of embassy operations.

Having thus consigned the career Foreign Service to the role of diplomatic hewers of wood and carriers of water, James went on to say: "The question is not whether we have too many political appointees. We don't have enough. I fight in every case for a political appointee instead of a career officer if the political appointee is qualified." Judging by the vast majority of non-career nominees who have come before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, a very easy standard of competence is applied.

As the only former career Foreign Service officer ever to sit in the Senate and as one who has personally known outstanding career diplomats such as George F. Kennan and Charles E. Bohlen and the late Llewellyn E. Thompson and W. Walton Butterworth, I consider the White House's attitude toward career diplomats not only demeaning but dangerous. In these perilous times it is essential that our country be represented abroad by the best and most experienced talent available. For the most part, that talent resides in the career Foreign Service; and to deny that this talent exists will only ensure that our brightest young people will reject careers in the Foreign Service.

This is not to say that there is no place for non-career ambassadors. John Kenneth Galbraith, Donald H. Rumsfeld and the late David K. E. Bruce were excellent non-career ambassadors, as are Arthur F. Burns and Mike Mansfield today. The point, however, is that a non-career ambassador should have clearly demonstrated talents and experience that compare favorably with the rigorous training and extensive on-the-

job experience of professional diplomats.

James' allegation that career diplomats are fit only to "carry out the minutiae, the day-to-day operations of the embassy that ambassadors don't bother with" is simply not true. More often than not, a non-career ambassador is educated by the embassy's career staff, which ensures that he commits a minimum of gaffes, guides him through the language barrier and generally props him up and makes him look good.

To consider access to the inner circle of the White House the primary criterion for appointment as an ambassador is to suggest that our foreign relations are conducted on the basis of personal connections. Would a keen analysis of a foreign situation or a cogent policy recommendation be ignored unless the ambassador communicating it is a friend of Ronald Reagan or on a first-name basis with presidential counselor Ed Meese?

If political appointees are needed to improve the quality of U.S. diplomacy, why should we limit the benefits from the downgrading of career personnel to the State Department? Why not appoint advertising executives to serve as generals and admirals? Why not place washing-machine manufacturers in the top echelons of the Federal Bureau of Investigation? Why not assign soap salesmen as chiefs of Central Intelligence Agency stations abroad? Wouldn't their access to the White House inner circle improve our military preparedness, promote more effective crime control and ensure that the President is fully aware of what the Soviets are up to?

If adding more political appointees is the key to improving our diplomacy, why not unleash an army of corporate cronies, political party functionaries and assorted ideologues to carry out the President's policies at all levels of government? Why not, indeed, do away with the concept of a career government service and bring back the spoils system?

Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) is the ranking minority member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He served as a Foreign Service officer in Czechoslovakia and Italy from 1945 to 1952.